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Moscow's Polish Problem

An Intelligence Assessment

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June 1981

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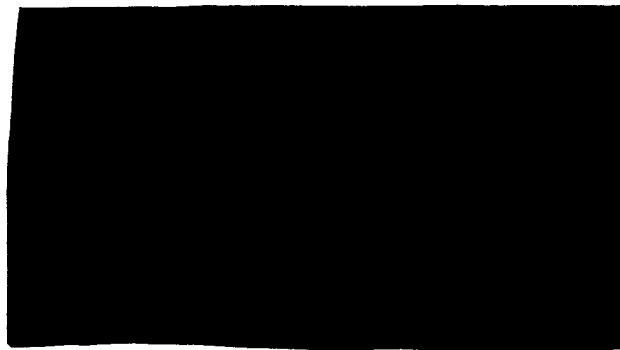
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*Information available as of 1 June 1981
has been used in the preparation of this report.*



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Moscow's Polish Problem

Key Judgments

The 11-month-old social and political crisis in Poland presents the USSR with one of its most significant and complex foreign policy problems since World War II. The Soviet response thus far has been measured, largely because of Poland's size, its people's strong sense of national identity and historic opposition to the Russians, and because military intervention would carry enormous costs with no guarantee of a satisfactory solution. (C)

At the outset, the Soviets adopted a political option—political and military pressure short of military intervention—because it was the least costly course and, on the basis of their experience with past Polish crises, held out hope of success. Moscow's confidence in this course of action, however, has eroded. The Kremlin's assessment of its chances for getting what it wants in Poland—a reversal of the liberalization process and the reassertion of Communist party predominance—is probably bleaker now than at any point in the crisis. The momentum of liberalization not only is not receding but has spread to the Communist party.

The nonmilitary levers Moscow is using seem increasingly ineffective; indeed, the only tool that has had any observable deterrent effect has been the threat of military intervention. Twice in the past six months the USSR and other Warsaw Pact countries took military preparations that increased their ability to move into Poland on short notice. The failure to go beyond rattling sabers, however, may have limited the effectiveness of future posturing.

The Soviets probably doubt that they can count on Polish military cooperation in rolling back liberalization. Therefore, if they decide to use military force, they will try to confront the Poles with such overwhelming strength that resistance would be futile.

Left undisturbed, the Polish liberalization process is likely to continue to evolve for years. The difficulty for the Soviet leadership is to decide at what point the costs of allowing this slow-motion revolution to continue outweigh the costs of ending it by military force.

We cannot say how close the Soviets might be to making a judgment to intervene militarily, but from their perspective the trend in Poland is decidedly negative. For Moscow, the key now is the course of the liberalization trend in the Polish party. It is not a foregone conclusion that the Polish leadership will be unable to control liberalization in the party. But if that movement gains significant strength before the extraordinary party congress in mid-July, the Kremlin will face a choice to intervene militarily or risk losing any chance of preserving a traditional Soviet-style Communist party in Poland.

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Lech Walesa, later to become the leader of the independent trade union Solidarity, addresses striking shipyard workers in Gdansk, August 1980.

Moscow's Polish Problem

Evolution of Soviet Policy

The Soviet response to the Polish crisis has evolved in three broad phases. From the initial strikes in July 1980 until late November, Moscow adopted a somewhat restrained stance; it stood by as the party settled the strikes on the Baltic Coast in late August by granting unprecedented concessions to the workers. The Soviets approved of, and possibly facilitated, party chief Gierek's removal on 5 September and firmly supported his successor, Stanislaw Kania. During the fall, the Kremlin applied some pressure on the Polish regime to stand firm against the demands of the free trade union, Solidarity, but appeared willing to give the new party leader maneuvering room to deal with Poland's problems.

Kania's concessions to Solidarity's escalating demands in late November prompted the Soviets to apply pressure more overtly. For the first time they appeared to be seriously considering military intervention, but then settled for other tactics—including a Warsaw Pact summit on 5 December—to make clear to the Polish leadership that Poland's allies expected a firmer line toward Solidarity. From the summit until early April, Moscow steadily increased its media criticism, pressed the Polish regime to complete plans for martial law, and used the Warsaw Pact exercise Soyuz-81 both to influence events in Poland and to increase Pact preparedness to intervene militarily. Although these pressures on Warsaw reached a peak during late March, the Kania regime again reached a compromise with Solidarity, this time over the incident in Bydgoszcz involving police brutality against Solidarity members (see appendix).

Despite the regime's concession, which averted a threatened general strike, Moscow decided to ease the military pressure. At the same time, however, it appears to have begun a reassessment of the situation. The important new factor, which may force the Kremlin to alter its strategy, is that the initial confrontational approach taken by the Polish party leadership to the Bydgoszcz incident provoked such a groundswell of support from the rank and file for

democratic reform of the party that a split in the party became a possibility. The issue of rallying party unity—but on a traditional Marxist-Leninist basis—has now overtaken the confrontation between the regime and Solidarity as the most crucial problem facing the Soviets.

Moscow's Political Option

At the outset of the crisis, the Soviets chose a political option—political and military pressure short of direct military intervention—because it was the easiest, least costly course and because it held out hope of success, even though it might take years for the regime to regain its authority in Poland.

The primary reason Moscow chose this course was—and continues to be—the enormous costs of military intervention:

- Subduing Poland would require the largest Soviet military operation since World War II and could involve fierce Polish resistance.
- Intervention would entail a long-term occupation by a sizable military force; such a diversion would complicate Soviet security planning in Europe. The Warsaw Pact would be weakened in any potential confrontation with NATO by an inability to use Poland's armed forces, as well as those Soviet forces tied down in Poland.
- The economic price of the invasion itself—not to mention the costs of reviving Poland's economy—would be immense. Moscow would take on an economic burden of at least \$10 billion a year to keep the Polish economy afloat. The disruption of that economy would in addition disturb increasingly integrated economies of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CEMA). Western credits, technology, and grain deliveries would dry up for the Soviet Union at least temporarily, further damaging its economic prospects.

Soviet President Brezhnev (r) greets Polish First Secretary Kania upon his arrival in Moscow for first meeting between the two leaders, 30 October 1980.



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- Moscow's effort to salvage detente in a critical strategic area—Europe—would be set back indefinitely. The Soviet attempt to derail NATO's theater nuclear force (TNF) modernization would founder, and the Kremlin's ability to influence those NATO member countries hedging or opposed to increased defense spending would be reduced. The prospects for progress in strategic arms limitation talks with the United States would presumably vanish.

Apart from these costs, there are a number of factors that have allowed the Soviet leaders to temporize in their approach to the Polish crisis. They had no reason, at least for the first several months, to question the loyalty of Kania, the Polish party, or the Polish Army. Despite much concern on the part of the other East European regimes, there has been no significant spillover of either labor or political unrest in any other Warsaw Pact country.

The Soviets probably also hoped that the situation in Poland could be turned around by political means. Moscow has had long experience with "Polish crises" and knows that concessions granted under duress on a number of occasions were gradually whittled away. The 1956 crisis—during which the Soviets also consid-

ered but then stepped back from military intervention—was broadly similar to the current trouble in Poland. At that time party leader Gomulka's success in taking back most of what he conceded gave the Soviet leaders grounds to believe that this course might be repeated.

Despite the damage to the Polish party from last summer's labor unrest, the Soviets were probably reasonably confident that the party under Kania—a former head of the security services—would be able to regroup and recoup its losses. Soviet officials expressed the view from the start that Poland's crisis stemmed from economic factors and could be resolved through an economic revival. The Soviets apparently believed that the added stringencies the Polish people would have to endure on the route to recovery would tarnish Solidarity's image as champion of working people. Moscow probably also calculated that Poland's Roman Catholic Church would act as a restraining force out of concern for Poland's national integrity.

Moscow's confidence in the validity of these premises has eroded as the crisis has progressed. The Polish leadership's unwillingness to confront Solidarity di-

rectly, its deteriorating control over local party branches, and the growth of a strong reform movement among the rank and file have given rise to grave doubts in the minds of the Soviet leaders that the Polish party has either the ability or the will to halt the liberalization process. It has become increasingly clear that the crisis, although sparked by economic issues, has taken on a primarily political cast and that the political challenge Solidarity represents will not disappear with an improvement in the economy. Finally, the Church has not had the restraining influence on Solidarity the Soviets hoped for; in fact, it pressed the regime to recognize the new farmers' union, Rural Solidarity.

Pursuing the political option has carried costs of its own. Prolonged political and economic instability in the USSR's largest and most important ally—which lies astride the traditional Central European invasion routes to and from Russia and is thus a vital corridor, essential to Soviet military security—has created anxiety among the Soviet armed forces. At the same time, the continuation of the crisis has interfered with Soviet foreign policy objectives. With the Soviet threat to Poland on the front page almost continuously in the West, Moscow has been put on the defensive and has had difficulty focusing Western attention on some of its initiatives, particularly President Brezhnev's proposal for a TNF moratorium.

Poland's troubles have also undercut the USSR's claim—central in its pitch to developing nations—that the Communist system is immune to such disruptions. The prolongation of the crisis is causing both political and economic problems for the East European regimes and strains within the Soviet-led alliance system. Because the existence of those regimes rests on Soviet military power, Moscow's failure to stop Polish liberalization could be interpreted as a sign of Soviet weakness by other East European populations and perhaps embolden them to make similar demands.

Basic Issues and Moscow's Objectives

The revolutionary changes that have taken place in Poland over the past 11 months include:

- The establishment of trade unions, independent of party control, for both workers and farmers.
- The creation of an independent student organization.
- The loosening of censorship.

- The transformation of the Parliament from a rubber stamp into a forum for the debate of social issues.
- The beginnings of a democratization of the Polish Communist party.

The dominant Soviet goal in the short run is to bring this process to a halt and, over the longer run, reverse it and restore a greater degree of party control over Polish society. At a minimum, the Kremlin wants a Poland that:

- Maintains Communist party preeminence.
- Remains loyal to the USSR.
- Supports Soviet foreign policy goals.
- Fulfills its military commitments to the Warsaw Pact.
- Observes its economic obligations to the CEMA countries.

In specific areas, set out below, the Soviets have certain ultimate objectives and minimum requirements. As the crisis has progressed, they have lowered their expectations in each area substantially and are probably willing to live with much less than they would have believed possible last August.

Reassertion of Party Control. The party, rather than regrouping after August, has been weakened by internal discord and has proved an ineffective tactician in its confrontation with Solidarity. Optimally, the Soviets want the party not to make any further concessions and to demonstrate through firm action that it is regaining the upper hand. At a minimum, Moscow is determined that the party avoid situations where it is forced to back down in the face of a show of strength by Solidarity. The Soviets realize that there is no returning to the pre-July 1980 style of party rule and thus may be willing to accept some sharing of power by the party in strictly defined areas like trade union and agricultural affairs.

Maintenance of the Centralized Communist Party.

Although the Kania leadership seems intent on preserving the party practice of democratic centralism, wherein decisions are made at the top and handed down, it is publicly committed to greater party democracy—including elections by secret ballot and with

Negotiations between Solidarity and the Polish Government, March 1980. Left to right: Minister of Trade Union Affairs Ciosek; Deputy Premier Rakowski; Solidarity Chief Walesa; Solidarity adviser Celinski. ■



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multiple candidates—that may loosen the leadership's grip on policy. The issue of party liberalization was the primary determinant of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and has emerged as the central issue in the Polish problem. Here too the Soviets understand, however, that a return to tight, centralized rule is impossible and may eventually come to tolerate a more diversified party if radical reforms are avoided. ■

Steer Solidarity Away From Politics. Solidarity has established itself as a strong, organized political force with substantial veto power over party decisions. Over time, the Soviets probably could learn to live with a Solidarity that focused primarily on trade union issues—even though in a Communist system those issues are inherently political. ■

Moscow believes that, as a first step, political dissidents, mainly intellectuals, who are giving the union a political ideology must be split from the workers. The Soviets have pressed for the arrest of the dissidents, but Kania has resisted, arguing that this would provoke a confrontation with the union that the government could not win. Instead, he is trying to use political tactics to separate the dissidents from the union but has made little progress. The fear that the regime may crack down, moreover, has helped prompt Solidarity to

assume a further political dimension as protector of the dissidents and political prisoners. ■

Unification of the Trade Union Movement Under Party Aegis. Moscow has continuously championed the still-existing government-controlled unions, seeing them as a political counterweight to Solidarity and the nucleus for an eventual reunification of Polish trade unions. Moscow and Warsaw want to breathe more vitality into the "loyal" unions, but have few practical ways to do so quickly. ■

Control of Two Existing Non-Communist Political Parties and Prevention of Formation of New Ones. The regime has been successful in this area, despite talk last fall of a Catholic party and recent ferment within the mainly middle class Democratic Party. The most serious threat might come from the new farmers' union, Rural Solidarity, which could drain support from the increasingly discredited United Peasants' Party. In Czechoslovakia in 1968, there were public calls for a true multiparty system at least five months before Moscow invaded. ■

Maintenance of Party Control of Media. Even though the party has kept the censorship mechanism largely intact, practices have been liberalized considerably. Kania, moreover, has been forced to give Solidarity



Polish leaders at Soviet party congress, 24 February 1981. First Secretary Kania, far left; Prime Minister Jaruzelski, top row center.

access to the media and has been unable to prevent it from issuing its own news sheets and leaflets, some of which have been highly critical of regime policies. The Soviets might continue to live with less censorship so long as open criticism of the Communist system or Poland's foreign policy, especially its alliance commitments, is avoided. Their decision to intervene militarily in Czechoslovakia was prompted in part by the breakdown of censorship. They will monitor closely the regime's success at reining in union publications, the terms of Solidarity's eventual access to the mass media, and the statutes of a new censorship bill now being drafted. ■

Remaining Options

Moscow's assessment of the chances for getting what it wants in Poland is probably bleaker now than at any time throughout the crisis. The momentum of liberalization not only is not receding but has spread to the Communist party. ■

The nonmilitary levers Moscow is using seem increasingly ineffective. The Soviets could put further pressure on the Polish regime to resist liberalization, or on the reformers to moderate their demands, through direct media criticism of Kania and Prime Minister

Jaruzelski, statements by Soviet Politburo members explicitly critical of the Polish party, and additional bilateral or Warsaw Pact summits. Moscow will also continue to support the few hardliners who remain in the Polish leadership, hoping at a minimum to prevent their removal. Replacing Kania with someone who would impose a tougher policy no longer seems to be a feasible option. Even if the Kremlin could pull the strings—which is doubtful—a hardline leader would be deserted by the majority of the party. ■

Similarly, Soviet prospects for convincing the Polish regime to declare martial law are limited. With most of the national leadership on record as opposed to such a forceful solution, it appears that the only thing that could compel Kania and Jaruzelski to implement martial law would be a Soviet ultimatum to do so or be invaded. There is little chance, moreover, that martial law could be instituted without sparking widespread unrest, which would, in turn, probably trigger a Soviet military intervention. Indeed, the only lever that has had any observable deterrent effect has been the threat of military intervention. ■

Twice in the past six months, at the end of November and in late March, the USSR and other Warsaw Pact

Warsaw Pact generals observe Soyuz-81 exercise in southwestern Poland, 22 March. Left to right: Soviet Marshal Kulikov, Commander in Chief Warsaw Pact Combined Armed Forces; Polish Prime Minister and Defense Minister Jaruzelski; East German Defense Minister Hoffman.



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countries took military preparations that increased their ability to move into Poland with limited forces on short notice. In neither case did the Soviets complete preparations that would be necessary to field a large combat force—including assembly of stocks of materials—sufficient to overwhelm the Polish Army should it resist. ■

The Polish leadership's knowledge of these military preparations and the reporting of them by the Western press have had a limited deterrent effect on unrest in Poland. The rattling of sabers and the failure to follow up, however, have probably limited the effectiveness of future Soviet posturing. The threat of force has become less a lever for the Soviets than a weapon of last resort—to be employed only after they conclude that the Polish leadership is unable to bring the situation under control. ■

The Military Option

In considering a military intervention, the Soviets probably would not be much concerned with the possibility of a NATO military reaction. What would concern them is the extent to which the Polish leadership and the party would oppose such an intervention, and, even if the Polish military leadership should acquiesce, the likelihood of resistance by Polish Army and internal security force units. ■

The Soviets probably now doubt they can count on Polish military cooperation. Therefore, in the event they decide to resolve the situation by military force, they will try to confront the Poles with such overwhelming strength that resistance would be futile. To project an image of unity on the part of the Warsaw Pact in rejecting Polish revisionism, the Soviets would also want other Pact armed forces to participate in the intervention. ■

All Warsaw Pact combat forces in and around Poland are now in garrison. Before a sufficiently large-scale invasion force could be committed in Poland, a major mobilization of reservists and civilian vehicles and widespread logistics preparations would have to be conducted. Such preparation would require about two weeks. ■

Some of the preparations undertaken since last fall will, however, make it easier for the Soviets to ready themselves for an intervention. A number of low-strength Soviet divisions in the western USSR have practiced mobilizing reservists since last September. Moreover, during the Soyuz-81 exercise, Warsaw Pact forces opposite Poland had an opportunity to refine plans for moving large combat forces into and across Poland. ■

Outlook

Trying to predict the course of any revolution in midstream—especially Poland's—is a risky venture; so too, with the Soviet Union's response to different developments in Poland. It would be safe to predict, however, that if party rule collapsed, or if Poland pulled out of the Warsaw Pact or CEMA, Moscow would intervene. It also seems likely that if the Polish party could limit the liberalization process, the Soviets could probably manage to live with a Solidarity that confined itself strictly to trade union issues. Kremlin decisionmaking in either of these cases would be greatly simplified. ■

The development of the crisis thus far, however, suggests that the revolution's course is likely to run between these extremes—and this is Moscow's dilemma. The strategy chosen, first by Solidarity and now by reformers inside the party, has been to confront the leadership, extract concessions before retreating, and then consolidate for the next round. The forces opposing the leadership are well aware that they have the strength to bring about a collapse of the system through an all-out confrontation. They are equally aware that this would bring in Soviet troops, and they would lose everything they have gained. ■

Left undisturbed, the liberalization process is likely to continue to evolve for years. The difficulty for the Soviet leadership is to decide when the costs of allowing this slow-motion revolution¹ to continue outweigh the costs of ending it by military force. ■

It cannot be concluded that simply because the Poles continue to proceed with caution, the Soviets also will forbear. The longer the liberalization continues, the deeper its roots grow and the costlier the Soviet option of using force becomes. Thus, the Soviet leaders may decide to intervene not in response to any particular event—such as the Bydgoszcz incident and its consequences—but on the basis of their analysis of an accumulation of less spectacular occurrences that seem to be evolving into an irreversible trend. ■

¹ Or, "creeping counterrevolution," as Moscow calls it. ■

Developments outside Poland might play an important role in Moscow's decisionmaking. The death of Brezhnev, for instance, could shift the balance in the Politburo toward those favoring a military intervention. Similarly, if the Soviets conclude that there is little prospect for any meaningful improvement in their relations with key Western countries, a crucial restraint will have been removed. ■

We cannot say how close the Soviets might be to making a judgment to intervene militarily, but from their perspective the trend in Poland is decidedly negative. For Moscow, the key now is the course of the liberalization in the Polish party. It is not a foregone conclusion that the Polish leadership will be unable to control liberalization in the party. But if that movement continues to gain strength before the extraordinary party congress in mid-July, the Kremlin will face a choice to intervene militarily or risk losing any chance of preserving a traditional Soviet-style Communist party in Poland. ■

Appendix

Selected Major Events in the Polish Crisis

1980

31 August

Gdansk Agreement. Regime agrees to numerous reforms, including the establishment of independent trade unions, after several weeks of negotiations with striking workers and in the face of a threatened general strike. Union organizers acknowledge the leading role of the Communist party and agree that the new union—subsequently named Solidarity—will not act as a political party. The agreement is a factor in the replacement of party leader Edward Gierek on 5 September and initiates the liberalization process that has continued to the present. Moscow is surprised by strength of the popular protest and reportedly endorses Gdansk agreement as a tactical move necessitated by the need to defuse the immediate crisis. At the same time, Moscow begins to take measures to improve the preparedness of military forces that would be used in any military contingency. [REDACTED]

3 October

Nationwide Strike. Solidarity, in its first show of strength, stages a one-hour strike for pay increases and access to the media. More broadly, the strike is intended to push for the application for legalization that Solidarity submitted in late September, and to impress on the party the union's power. Action may have prompted new party leader Kania to hold his first meeting with Solidarity activists a week later, and provided further evidence to Moscow that Solidarity commands substantial nationwide support. [REDACTED]

10 November

Solidarity Legalization. In agreement worked out soon after Kania's late-October visit to Moscow, regime accepts a version of union's charter that it had earlier rejected. Although action is greeted jubilantly by union leaders, it fails to end labor unrest. Soviets publicly ignore the legalization, although they may have given grudging approval in advance in the belief this step would stabilize the situation. [REDACTED]

5 December

Warsaw Pact Meeting. Moscow summit is part of Soviet pressure campaign—including military movements at Poland's borders—in response to escalating labor unrest and the Polish regime's capitulation to Solidarity's political demands. Kania buys time, apparently on condition that he resist union demands more firmly. [REDACTED]

1981

31 January

Workweek Issue Resolved. Solidarity wins concessions on early introduction of 40-hour workweek, publication of a union newspaper, and radio-television coverage of union activities. Agreement comes after a month of increasing tension between the union and the government, including two major work stoppages by union members, and on the eve of a threatened nationwide general strike. Regime threatens to impose martial law but does not follow through. Soviet media coverage reveals increasing Kremlin displeasure with the regime for yielding on key issues. ■

9 February

Jaruzelski Becomes Prime Minister. He retains his defense ministry portfolio, presumably to underscore warnings that the regime will use force unless the labor turmoil ceases. Appointment is a response to growing party and union disenchantment with government's performance and to Soviet concern over continued concessions. Soviets strongly endorse appointment. Jaruzelski calls for 90-day strike moratorium, but is compelled to meet student demands for an independent union to secure domestic tranquillity, which lasts only until early March. After conclusion of Soviet party congress on 3 March, Soviet and Polish leaders hold summit. It reveals that Soviets had become less confident in Kania's ability to control liberalization process. ■

30 March

Settlement of Bydgoszcz Incident. Agreement between Solidarity and government concludes period of heightened tension marked by a brief nationwide strike and a stormy party Central Committee plenum at which leadership is criticized for its hardline stance. Government promises, in the agreement, to punish those guilty of beating up Solidarity activists in Bydgoszcz and guarantees security of new union. Dissatisfaction within Solidarity leadership that negotiations had not been more fruitful leads to resignation of several militants. Moscow, after exhorting the regime to stand firm through its media and extending the Warsaw Pact exercise Soyuz-81, eases the pressure slightly. Jaruzelski proposes a new strike moratorium in part to mollify the Soviets, who were probably displeased over regime concessions in the agreement. The regime subsequently adopts a more moderate posture and approves registration of the peasants' union, Rural Solidarity. ■

29 April

Central Committee Plenum. Polish party leadership goes on record favoring greater party democratization and makes limited personnel changes in response to growing pressure from rank and file for broader reforms. Extraordinary party congress is set for mid-July. Soviet party ideologue Suslov confers in Warsaw with Polish leadership the week before the plenum. Poles present case that some party reforms are essential, while Suslov expressed deep Soviet concern over the move. ■

Warsaw Pact Forces in and Around Poland

